

“SPIDER MAN”, WEAVING THE HUMAN WEB...

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Dr. Ganesh Nanu Vankhede (66) fondly known as “GNV Sir” among the thousands of students, across India and Asia, is no more with us. His sudden demise was a big shock to all of us. We loved him so much (and reciprocal too) that we still do not want to believe that G.N. Sir is no more with us.

Let’s remember the short stint of this tall man. I remember Dr. Vankhede when he was not known as a “Spider man”, around 1997. He invited me, just after I finished the ‘Save Satpuda’ foot march to deliver a talk to his students. But this ended up by signing a list of field assignments for his students. I remember every moment after that in the last two decades that we spent together for the betterment of his students and conservation of the Satpuda Landscape.

Dr. Ganesh Vankhede born on 17th August, 1951 at Raver in Jalgaon district of old Khandesh. He did his B.Sc in 1972 in Zoology and M. Sc in 1974 in Cell Biology and Fisheries. He completed his Ph.D. in 1990 in “degradation and accumulation of pesticides in freshwater ecosystem and its effect on oxygen consumption by some indicator species”. This had set a goal/s for the rest of his hectic life.

His extensive 40 years of teaching experience to graduate and post graduate students and 26 years of research experience made him a scientist of international repute. Apart from producing 14 valuable books, he also contributed 33 valuable publications to his credit, including 08 research papers in international and 32 in national journals. He participated in 4 international conferences at Japan, Poland, Laos and Thailand and in 56 national conferences/ symposia/ seminars in India. He loved sharing his thoughts and innovative ideas among the students. He motivated research students by delivering innumerable invited talks and chairing 52 sessions in several Universities.

To me, he was an exceptional academician unlike any other University Professors. In my 20 years of association with him, I found him as a man who converted “closed Labs” to open and used academic research to conserve the species in the wild. Shortly, after our first meeting in 1997, we started working on many collaborative programmes. In the year 1999, we organised a national consultation at SGB Amaravti University which was attended by many IFS officers serving in Maharashtra and professors from around 20 Indian Universities. This helped to build a solid bridge between these two important communities. It later resulted into an invitation from the Maharashtra Forest Department to arrange a “Three Decades of Melghat Tiger Reserve” programme at the University campus in October 2004.

We visited Tapi River together, flowing through Melghat Tiger Reserve in 2002 while doing an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of an irrigation project. Later, I saw him delivering several talks in central Indian Universities on EIA. Not only that, he allotted a Ph. D topic on Tapi river to one of the students. His EIA report could actually help change the location of Upper Tapi Irrigation project, saving 280 ha forest of Melghat Tiger Reserve from submergence. The field visits with his Ph. D students in Melghat gave birth to many other Ph. D topics like colour pattern on butterfly wings, importance of hair identification in scat analysis of carnivores, prey-predator relationship from scat analysis, impact of village relocation and

spider distribution in different micro habitats of Satpuda landscape. He himself had completed 06 research projects and other 02 in collaboration.

His research interest and Specialization in Toxicology, ecology, wildlife studies and conservation, Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) and immunology has actually helped many Government and Non Government organizations in saving the species in central India.

Due to these field projects, he was closely associated with the Satpuda Foundation a premier NGO in central India and helped us in fighting many battles to protect the biodiversity of Satpuda region by providing his valuable research outcomes. With the Satpuda Foundation, he commenced many research and environment education programmes for Indian and foreign students at the University campus and in the Tiger Reserves.

Though he spearheaded so many diverse research projects, he focused on various aspects of spiders over the last decade. This extensive work has given him the recognition as one of the few experts in India on spiders who recorded 1569 species of Spiders from Melghat and the Satpuda region of which around 300 spider species have been recorded from India for the first time. This work has been much appreciated in the international conference on arachnids, held in Poland in 2010. He recently hosted the 3rd Conference of Asian Society of Arachnology at Amravati in November 2015.

He was immensely committed to his research work and had a great respect and sense of responsibility towards the people living in the landscape, including his birthplace. We worked in Yawal sanctuary, his home PA in Jalgaon district in 2004 to 2007. The district is known for banana cultivation. Later, he allotted a Ph. D topic on comparative study on spiders in banana fields and cotton/orange fields. He was hurt with the issue of farmer suicides and threw himself for a few months in the orange orchards of northern Amravati district and cotton/tuar fields in other part of the district. Around 28 students have been awarded Ph. D under his supervision on such innovative and most useful applied projects.

His tenure as Professor and Head of Post Graduate Department of Zoology, S.G.B. Amravati University, Amravati was full of enthusiasm and challenges. He was available 24X7 to students as well as all the vice chancellors who took the University to different heights with his support. Though being close to the highest and lucrative chair, he never felt like occupying it, nonetheless he deserved the most. Rather, he politely refused to accept the offer to become Pro-Vice Chancellor (VC) and not even applied for the post of VC of SGB Amravati University. He focused on his studious contribution on University's Management Council, (2005-2008), Senate (2005-2010), IQAC, Board of Studies in Zoology, Board of Studies in Biotechnology, Research Recognition Committee for the subject Environmental Science and Research Recognition Committee for the subject Zoology. His services on University Employment Information, Self-Employment and Guidance Bureau, Pre-examination Coaching Centre and the splendid preparation during the visit of NAAC Committee in 2010 were much appreciated in the University circle.

Dr. Vankhede himself was an institution. He continued his helping hand to his Ph. D students even after completion of their work. The students have now imprinted their names in the academic and research arena. He also assisted Government departments including the Maharashtra Biodiversity Board and National Tiger Conservation Authority of Ministry of Environment and Forest to complete several field inspections and projects. He has served

on several committees of various universities in India including the syllabus committee of MPSC, Mumbai.

He continued his work as a Life member of Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai, Academy of Environmental Biology, Lucknow, International Society of Arachnology, USA, Asia and Oceania Society for Comparative Endocrinology and Japan Society for Comparative Endocrinology, Japan, Indian Science Congress Association, Kolkata, Indian Science Congress Association Amravati Chapter and Council Member of Asian Society of Arachnology most recently.

Dr. Ganesh Vankhede founded the Indian Society of Arachnology in 2012 and also served as the first President of the Society during 2012-2015. He also established the publication “Indian Journal of Arachnology” dedicated to the study of arachnids. I am sure that his association with every such institute and individual is a separate story to document.

He was working as Chief Editor of an International Journal of Comparative Toxicology and Physiology (ISSN-0972-8651) and Indian Journal of Arachnology (ISSN 2278-1587) as an editor of a research journal of Amravati University of a national recognition.

For his path breaking work, he received the fellowship of Nature Conservators in the year 2002 and a prestigious Gold Medal of Zoological Society of India in year 2003. He was awarded by a Sanctuary-Royal Bank of Scotland Wild Life Service Award in 2010 and Kirloskar Vasundhara Sanman Award by International Film Festival in 2012. He was also the recipient of Asutosh Mookerjee Fellowship for superannuated scientists (2016-2020).

Dr. G. N. Vankhede was admitted in the hospital at Nagpur in June and was responding well to the treatment of acute lymphoblastic leukemia. However, his nervous system suddenly broke down which resulted in his sad demise.

The entire world of spider lovers and the students of nature in general, lost their friend, mentor and “Guru” on 01st July, 2016. His book on spiders is incomplete. His last issue of this Journal was ready to be published. Let us dedicate this issue to this great scientist who is now survived by his wife Sanjeevani, two sons Dinesh and Sameer, two daughter-in-laws Smita and Swati, brother Dr. Ravindra, sister-in-law Dr. Nilima and a huge number of students and friends across Asia.

Dr. Ganesh Vankhede has woven the huge human web, of which, we all are a part of. I think that continuing his work further would be the only best tribute to his departed soul.